

WILLIAM GIBSON HISTORY

Tape #289

Talk given by George Long, September 9, 1995

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George Long (George): William Gibson gave us “Remember the Maine” and the inscription painted on the canyon wall, “Remember the Maine” in 1898, when the battleship sank in the Havana Harbor and started the Spanish American War.

Gibson was an extraordinary man, one of the foremost pioneers in Ashley Valley history. He had a fellow by the name of Boyd who was a painter. He belonged to a group that did inscriptions and painting, but after they done the painting he become very ill and said he’d never tackle that kind of job again. Whether it was just following that or later, he didn’t live long.

Then in 1944, a quorum of elders, Slaugh told me about it, Marvin Chivers, Earl Goodrich and some of them, got together and they painted the flag and Pearl Harbor up there. Hyrum’s name isn’t up there with the others, but he was very much involved in it. He said what a time they had because they let the riggin’ down—it hung out about ten feet from the wall—and what a chore it was getting it swung in there and getting it secured so they could paint that flag. Before they were through, they were nearly sick, too. It was quite a thing.

Mr. Gibson left his mark there as he did in other ways here in this valley. He, along with Pard Dodds, [were] probably the first white men, at least that made their residence here. They were probably the first ones to come in this valley. We know that Ashley and some of them came in prior to that.

I’ll give you some of the background of William Gibson. He was born in April 1845 in Scotland. He came to America when he was six years old with his parents and sister and a brother. He went to New Orleans, from there to St. Louis, and his mother and dad separated. His mother, brother and sister, and himself went on to Council Bluffs, Iowa, then into the Great Salt Lake [Valley]. They got into Salt Lake about 1860.

Between that time—and he’s fifteen years old—until 1875, he made several trips across the plains. I think seven altogether. On one trip his shoes wore out—they had to do a lot of walking—his feet bled, his socks wore out. It was a harrowing experience for him. They nearly starved; they suffered badly from storms. He survived it and won the acclaim from those around him for being such a young man and having the courage and determination and stamina he had. They moved into Kamas, Utah, when he was about sixteen years old, and when he was nineteen, he married Mary Lambert. The Lambert family lived in Kamas.

He participated in the Black Hawk War here in Utah. Blackhawk was a Ute Indian Chieftain. They made him captain and he and Lambert, [who,] by the way, was his father-in-law, participated in this. Lambert was a lieutenant. Following that Black Hawk War, he took part a lot in the excursions when the Indians would steal horses from the white people in the settlement. He went on several different forays hunting Indians who had stolen their horses. That’s how he got out in the Uinta Basin.

One such trip took him to the Brush Creek area. They had stole his team among the other

horses. He was very proud of this team. One of them he had taught to lay down on command. The horse would do it. He always said it was good to have a horse this way, because in the skirmishes they had there [were] times he would have to use a horse for protection, or breastwork, in the fighting that took place. The poor horse would suffer probably from the arrows and bullets, but he trained his horses this way, some of them.

These Indians stole his team. They took after them and it brought them over in the Ashley Valley area, Brush Creek, about where Bob and Luella live. The way he described it, it was the tributary to Brush Creek and probably Little Brush Creek. Before this, he found one of his horses dead, it was shot. Gibson, Billy was what they called him, Billy Gibson, he always said an Indian wouldn't put up with a horse that he couldn't do what he wanted with. In other words, if the horse was balky or hard to handle, they would kill it. They just wouldn't put up with that at all. Evidently this one work horse wouldn't do what as they wanted, so they shot it.

They followed and found them at Brush Creek. As they drew down on them, he said he could see this Indian on his other work horse. He said that was a good animal and he knew it could outrun the horse he was on, but the Indian didn't particularly know how to handle it as well. He gained on him and got him separated from the other horses and drew down on the Indian. He said, "I could have shot him." The Indian jumped off the horse into the creek, but he said, "I kept on after the horse and got it and then I came back later." He said, "I really didn't have murder in my heart to kill the Indian, but," he said, "I felt like it, bein' they had shot my other horse." The Indian got away; they retrieved the horses. They were gone twenty-seven days.

That was the time they rode down through Steinaker Draw and come out on the mouth of Steinaker Draw, where the dam is, and he looked across the valley and he said, "This is going to be my place." Sagebrush was as high a man's head and it indicated good fertile ground. There was a spring, in fact, there's a spring today named after him on the Sowards/Gibson ranch. He made up his mind in 1869, this was where he was going to live and eight years later it was.

Another a trip he had, he went on 2,000 miles chasing Indians and recapturing horses. You want to remember, to an Indian, that was a great sport, to steal horses. That was one of their greatest sports. They stole from one another and then when the white people came in they enjoyed stealing from them. They would take them out into the Book Cliffs, which at that time was an unknown area. No one knew anything about it except the Indians. They'd take them out there and then they would rest up out there somewhere, where there was water. A lot of places in the Book Cliffs, there is not water. But they would hole up and rest. Then when they were rested, they would go down into central Utah and trade horses to other Indians. They traded for blankets to the Navajos. They would even go further south.

So on this one trip, there was he and three men: a fellow by the name of Clark and his relative, John Lambert. They went down through Duchesne and Myton and crossed the White River and the Green River. But before that, I need to back up. One of the horses went lame, so they stopped at the [Indian] agency. Pard Dodd was running it. Pard gave them supplies and he told them to take three Indians guides, an Indian by the name of Yank, and another by the name of Sagoose and one by the name of Little Doctor. Well, they were short one horse so Clark stayed there with Pard and kind of helped him at the agency, and the two men with the three Indians took off.

They got out across White River and down in that country and another horse went lame and they had to leave it. They took turns walking out into the Book Cliffs following these horses.

They run out of food and water.'Course they could eat berries and stuff like that when they found them. When it came Gibson's turn to walk, they were in the roughest part of the area and they were very thirsty, in fact, he said, "I'd drink blood if we had it." Well, Sagoose killed a rabbit and Gibson split it open. The blood had kind of coagulated in it and he drank the blood and John Lambert said, "Hey, save some for me." So he handed it to Lambert and Lambert took one swallow and he couldn't go it. The Indians were amazed, they called him "Anishibob," which means blood-drinker. That stayed with him all his life. The Indians called him Anishibob.

So they went on and they found the Indians. There was a big camp of them. Gibson said, "We knew we couldn't take them." So they waited 'til dark, and luckily, a thunderstorm came up, lightning and wind. They were able to get the horses and among these horses was one white horse that belonged to some of them. It was a leader, they called it. The other horses had a tendency to follow it, and they took off in this rain storm with lightning flashing and they went under a cedar tree and there was low, hanging, dead limb. The other men all made it under but Gibson. It hooked right under the back of his neck, under his coat, and lifted him right off his horse. He hollered and finally one of them heard him and they come back. He said, "If they hadn't heard me, I'd probably been hanging there yet because, he said, "I'd never practiced undressing from a limb."

When they got back—they were gone thirty days—at Kamas they were preparing a search party to go look for them. His clothes were in tatters.

On one such trip, he lost his hat and made a hat out of some willows. He made one trip into Brown's Park area for Indians, another down to Provo Canyon country. I don't know just where, but he made four of these long trips.

To tell you how they survived, they'd take dough with them, 'course they killed rabbits or deer or something, too, but they'd make this dough up in one of them's hat, if it didn't have holes in it. They would mix the dough up and they would put it on willows and cook it over a fire. They would cook two or three of these a piece, then they would get on their horses and go and eat as they traveled. Not a very consuming meal.

I'd like to mention, too, while they were on the ocean coming over they were eighty-seven days on the ship, on that ocean. The name of the ship was "Gull of the Air." Can you imagine being on the ocean nearly ninety days? Back in them times, the water got stagnant, it was quite an ordeal.

In 1877, he moved his family here and homesteaded and his neighbor, Pardon Dodds, Captain, as they called him, who had been a captain in the Civil War, he had left the Indian Agency and he came over here a few years earlier. Those two men pretty well had their pick of the property they wanted. 'Course, Gibson wanted what he saw there in the mouth of Steinkjer Draw. He ended up with a total of 1,840 acres. He homesteaded, his wife homesteaded, he had a couple of hired hands homestead and then he bought them out later. Some of it was in Steinkjer Draw and later his son-in-law, N. G. Sowards, also had ground in Steinkjer Draw that he got under what they call "Desert Entry." That's still in the Sowards family.

When I gave that talk before on Gibson about thirteen, fourteen years ago, I mentioned 1,840 acres and I gave a piece to the *Vernal Express* and they put a 184 acres, so Carl Sowards had just moved up here from California at that time and, boy, he was on the phone, letting me know that there was much more ground than that.

He did a lot to improve this land. He cleared the brush, he helped extend the Rock Point

Canal, was a big stockholder in it. He done a lot of good in the valley. Although he was a small man, only five foot eight, about 160-165 pounds, he was considered a very fisticuff scrapper. I mean, he could handle himself, and he enjoyed what they called... I can't remember, a brain-busting melee or something.

When they were having the election for the first sheriff, Gibson and one of the nominees, one of the guys running for sheriff, the guy that got it, too, they got into quite an argument the night before the election. They went to blows over it. When the election was over, this man won the election but he had to be sworn in with two black eyes and a nose sitting off to one side. He said, "I sure don't want anything more to do with Billy Gibson."

I want to back up a little ways and tell you about the episode he had with a grizzly bear. He was getting out logs; he was a great hand to help build forts. He helped build several forts around the country. The evidence of this is at his place today, the old rock corral and stone house that he built over a hundred years ago. The remains are still there. It is worth your time to drive by and look at it. He told about getting out some heavy logs and he heard a rustling behind him and turned around and there was a grizzly bear. At one time there were grizzlies in the country, not many, but there was. He was confronted by one and he no weapon he could get to in reach. He knew if he run, he would be a goner as bears outrun you. So he said, "I stared the bear down. I looked right directly into his eyes and he would turn his eyes and he'd come back. Three or four times he done that." The bear finally turned and walked away. He said, "This shows you the power of the eye." I've heard Lee Sowards tell this story many times.

I wished Elmo Hardy was here. I've had him tell me, "He the weirdest-looking eyes I've ever seen in a man's face." They were slits like a cat and he said he could look at you with that blank stare that he had and with those eyes and just make chills run up your back. Elmo worked for him when he was a teenager. He was noted for his bravery and I guess that was one of the times that it really excelled. As he said, "It wouldn't have done me any good to run, that was the only recourse I had was to stare him down."

He built the home that is still standing there, I think in 1895, one of the older homes in the valley. It's a frame home and considered one of the nicest at that time. He was very proud of it. He had three children, James and Mary were born in Kamas and Sarah born here. Mary, the mother to Lee Sowards and wife of N.G. Sowards, was one of the finest-looking women that Ashley Valley ever knew. She was a beautiful woman. She got some of her education here and then at one time, Mr. Gibson sent her and her mother and her younger sister to Salt Lake for a couple of years schooling. He gave them as good an education as they could have. He was a self-educated man. He took some schooling, but he would read anything he could get his hands on.

When they knew that Utah was going to become a state, they had an election in November of 1895 and he was elected to the first legislature. He participated in Utah becoming a state. He told how he would ride the train from Price to Salt Lake, catch the stage from here to Price. One time coming back, he missed the stage by a couple or three hours one Saturday morning. There wasn't another one 'til Monday; so he took his valise and took off a-walking. Between catching a ride on a freight wagon or something, he walked. He made the distance into Vernal, spending the night out somewhere.

About 1910 he wrote his memoirs, or so to speak, up to that time. He decided to start building a tomb on the hill just above where they live, on the west end of the dam, where the dam is. Started building a tomb. He had to dynamite some of it for he and his wife to be buried

in. They had buried some members there already in a little cemetery they had. It took him a long time to get this finished. In 1922 he finished it. By then he had quite a few grandchildren, so he told Lee Sowards, who was twenty years old, and Marl Gibson, Jane Gibson's son, and another grandson named Lambert Gibson, he told them boys, he said, "Now in the morning I want you up on the hill where I'm finishing my grave. I want you there by daylight. I've got something to tell and to show you. You be there because I'm going to sleep there tonight."

So he took his bedroll and went up and crawled down in the tomb. The next morning Lee and his cousins were there. He had them help him out and said (this time he was 77 years old), "This is where I want to be the morning of the resurrection. I want to be able to look out across my land, my cattle, my place and where I grubbed the sagebrush and worked, built ditches and across this valley I love. I want you boys to promise that you will never let anything bother this spot of ground, or bother your grandmother and I as we lay here. Make this promise." And they promised him. He said those eyes would look right through you, you know.

Well, thirty-seven years later they had to break that promise. The dam was being put in and they had to move "Bill off the Hill" as the saying went. How he'll accept that, no one knows 'til that time comes. It bothered Lee, it really did, but it was something they had to do.

His brand was what they called the WG, William Gibson. I think it is still recorded in the Sowards' family as their brand.

He said he enjoyed having a "good skull-crackin" melee. In other words, he enjoyed a fight, he never backed down from one. One time, after they got a little more friendly with the Indians, a little more togetherness, the Indians had what they called their champion of the northeastern Utah area, so Gibson challenged him to a fight. They had it at one of their big do-ins that the Indians had. They fought for over two hours and finally quit, declaring it a draw.

Another occasion, he told about having Indians coming into their home and having them for dinner or supper. Said his wife, Mary, soon found out that she would prepare their plates for them and hand it to them rather than to pass the platters around as we normally do. If you passed a platter to an Indian, he assumed it was all his and he took it.

In 1924 he bought a Dodge touring car for his wife, he never did drive, and he bought her this car and he built a garage and it's there with doors on each end. He instructed her that if she forgot how to stop it, she could go right on through and out the back and run into the walnut tree.

Elmo Hardy told me, when he worked for him, about the time they got car, just prior to that, she was head of the Ashley Ward Relief Society and one thing she believed in, and he did, too, was being prompt. One of his jobs was to fix a little flake of hay on the back of the buggy so she could feed her horse at noon time. Anyway, this one time, she come driving by the house and Billy looked out and says, "Boy, it looks like all you got on there is a bunch of stems." He got after him and said, "You go down to that stack and you get some good hay for that mare." Elmo said, "I had to take the other off and go pick out some better." He said he soon learned that when Mr. Gibson told him to do something, you better do it and do it right.

He said after they got the car, she was going down the road one day and there were some deep ruts. That was pretty muddy down below their place. It had dried up and left some deep ruts. She got in those ruts and finally got out of them and as she did, she over-corrected and went over too far and kind of into the slough, the bar-pit was kind of swampy. Elmo said, "I saw her and she was a waving and I beat it down there. She said, 'Go get Billy and get the team and get me out of here.' I went back and Mr. Gibson was standing there in the yard and he said,

‘What’s going on?’ Well, she’s stuck and wants the team. ‘She does, does she? Well, go get the team.’ We went down there and hooked on to the back of the Dodge car and Billy said, ‘Wait a minute. Mary, if you’d a-stayed in them deep ruts, you never would have got stuck.’ ‘Well,’ she said, ‘It was rough and everything and I thought it was going to high-center.’ ‘Ah, you just leave the thinking up to me.’”

They had quite a set-to over that. Anyway they got her out. Elmo said they really thought a lot of each other, but they were quite stern in their decision making and one thing or another like that. After they got her out and she got on her way, Mr. Gibson smiled and said, “Ah, that’s one time I got her.”

In 1932 he passed away, December 1932, and was laid to rest in the tomb he made. He lined it with cement, I’ve seen it. It was quite a place. Then three years later, in 1935, she followed him. No doubt this couple had probably one of the most interesting and exciting backgrounds of any couple that ever lived in Ashley Valley.

In closing, I would like to say [something] about the Sowards family. Nelson (N.G.) Sowards that married their daughter, Mary, she was named after her mother, was probably the best penman that the state of Utah has ever known. A lot of the colleges would have him write their honor rolls and stuff. He had a penmanship that was beyond anyone. Also members of that family, Lee, was a good writer, so was Vaughn. It seems like that was a trait with them.

Of all the grandsons, if there was a favorite, it was Lee. Lee done things exactly the way his granddad wanted it done. And he done this years after his granddad died. I have heard him say, “Well, so and so wants me to get a tractor or combine or whatever, but by golly,” he says, “This is the way I learned how to do it and if it was good enough back then, it’s good enough now.” That was kind of Lee’s way. As a good man, I don’t know of anyone better.

He was like a second father to me. I enjoyed working for him. We’d have those big get-togethers up there, meals, threshing time, and I’d sit down under a shade tree and cut watermelon. Butch Hall worked for Lee a lot and Lee had so much regard for Butch. Lee would say, “If anyone knows how things should be done, it’s Butch. I never have to worry.” Also, Butch’s dad could come and work. Orson sort of let it be known he figured he was about the best hay-pitcher in the valley. He could really pitch hay even as an old man. I know [when he was] pitching grain out in the field, in the wagon, to haul it in to be threshed, ever once in awhile he would throw a bundle clear over the wagon on the other side. They would say, “Hey, what’s goin’ on?” And Orson said, “Well, I figured you didn’t have enough to do over there.” Any of you that knew these men know what I mean. They were extraordinary people. We lost a lot, when we lost people like Lee Sowards and the Gibsons.

Wanda Staley: George, tell them about the rattlesnake that decided to come through the house.

George: I didn’t get in on that.

Wanda: That old log house they built out there, ‘course there were cracks along the logs. Mrs. Gibson was fixing dinner one day. She turned around and she saw this snake coming through this crack in these logs, so she grabbed her scissors and went outside and went around and chopped him in two outside.

Liz Weist: When the people moved into Old Ashley Town during the Meeker Massacre, Billy Gibson was the only one that moved his house in there. It was there about a year, then he turned it over to the county and that was the county courthouse. Later, they moved it to town and it was on the corner of First North and Vernal Avenue.

George: The cabin was used by the county as a courthouse until one could be built. I'd heard that.

Gibson used to partake of the spirits, ahh a little whiskey, corn liqueur, but he quit and quit all of a sudden. He had been to a shebang up in the Old Town, he always liked to take a pint home with him to have the next morning. He wasn't a habitual or bad drinker, don't take me that way, he just liked a good shot now and then. He got pretty loaded this night, someone slipped something into the bottle that was pretty high, potent stuff, it probably would have taken his life.

As he was coming home, his horse stopped all of a sudden and he fell off. There was a little creek up through there between Old Town and his place and he fell off and this bottle fell out of his pocket. He got on home and the next morning he was fishing around and couldn't find the bottle and knew he left with it so he went back and he found it. He could see that the seal had been... Back then they didn't have corks stuck in them, but they kind of a little seal. Maybe it was made out paraffin wax or something, I don't know, but he could see that it had been tampered with. He got to looking and it had been spiked with some kind of poison. He decided it was time to quit, so he quit. He was just lucky that his old horse came to a sudden stop and he fell off. That isn't too commonly known, but it did happen.